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Yazoo Pump: Is it really a farm project?

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Editor's Note: This is the third of a four-part series examining the roles of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

"The pumps are specifically designed to drain wetlands so that large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands," U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Jan. 23, 2003.

"The purpose of this project is not to create new agricultural opportunities in this part of the Mississippi Delta," U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Jan. 23, 2003.

ROLLING FORK—So is the Yazoo Backwater Pump, at its heart, a project primarily designed to enhance agricultural production or not?

Economists at the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers apparently believe it is, because without agriculture, the proposed project could not come close to being economically justified by government standards.

In its draft report on the project, released in 2000, the Corps concluded that building a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pumping plant in southern Issaquena County would produce combined flood control benefits of \$21.5 million per year—of which a whopping \$17.1 million (80 percent) are either directly agricultural or agriculture-related—to offset the pump's \$181 million price tag and 50-year maintenance and operation costs.

So which lands in Sharkey and Issaquena counties—which lands making up the so-called "sump" of the South Delta, most frequently suffering the effects of backwater flooding—would receive the most direct benefits from the pump?

The most eye-catching result of an examination of the tax rolls of the two counties is that the vast majority of the South Delta's lowest-lying lands, those beneath a line just south of Cary, are not owned by South Delta.

Of the 270,000 acres which make up much of the twin-counties' two-year flood frequency plain, 68 percent are owned either by the government or absentee



Lots of trees

The United States government is the largest landowner in southern Sharkey and Issaquena counties and much of that land, along with several large private holdings, is forested.

—Photo courtesy U.S. Forest Service

landlords. In Sharkey County, more than a third (39 percent) of all the acres south of the Cary line are government owned, and in Issaquena County, more than half (58 percent) of those acres are under the ownership of those who live elsewhere and use the land for either forestry, conservation or recreation-related purposes.

Issaquena County land in the sump seems to be particularly attractive to out of county buyers. More than 15,000 acres can be identified specifically as used for hunting purposes, and at one point on the county tax rolls, 66 consecutive parcels of land, ranging in size from 20 acres to one acre, are owned by absentee landlords who apparently utilize it almost solely for recreation.

In both South Delta counties a considerable number of acres, the majority of which are among their lowest-lying lands, have been enrolled in a pair of government programs—the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), which are designed to encourage conservation practices on marginal agricultural lands. Farm Service Agency records show that in Sharkey and Issaquena counties, 6,016.2 acres are currently under government CRP contracts, while National Resource Conservation Service records indicate that 20,217 acres in the two counties have been enrolled in WRP.

So who actually owns the sump? The largest landowner in the twin counties, south of the Cary line is the United States government, which owns 36,824.8 acres, much of it represented by the Delta National Forest.

Among privately held property, the forestry giant Audubon-Tully, with 35,801 acres, is the largest landowner in the two counties, followed by two other conservation holdings, Delta Wildlife and Forestry with 21,037 acres and Van Development with 10,284 acres, respectively.

In all, 18 companies, individuals or combined family holdings make up 54 percent of all the privately owned land in both counties south of Cary.

In addition to the three huge, largely forested blocks of property, the others are Moore family holdings, Dent Plantation, Carter family holdings, Jessie Willis, Kline family holdings, O.J. Sharpe, Allen family holdings, Ernest Thomas, Heigle family holdings, Atwood Partners, Bessinger Enterprises, Lazenby family holdings, Powers and Company, McPherson family holdings, and Garden family holdings.

The 18 largest landowners combine for the ownership of 115,656.2 acres of land in southern Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

In the economic analysis section of its Project Report, the Corps raised eyebrows both with its evaluation of current land pat-

terns and its prediction that those patterns would remain unchanged over time, whether the pump was built or not.

"Future land use in the Yazoo Backwater area flood plain without or with implementation of water resources improvements is expected to parallel that of current use," the report's economic analysis says. "Existing trends toward reliance on manufacturing and the lesser importance of agriculture are expected to continue."

That's clearly not the case

in Sharkey and Issaquena counties, where very little manufacturing activity now exists in the wake of factory closings within the last decade, and the twin-county economy is today almost entirely agriculture-dominated.

But it is indeed in the area of increased agricultural production that the Corps concludes the South Delta will achieve its greatest benefits from the pump. Although it has been criticized for calculating ag-related benefits using 1992 and 1994 data, the Corps says the pump will produce increased crop yields for virtually every South Delta crop. Cotton yields are predicted to rise as much as 71 pounds per acre, depending on land quality, and soybean yields are predicted to rise 3.5 bushels per acre.

With the pump in place, the Corps also says that farm land values would increase. Its report estimates that every acre of cleared land will rise in value from \$23.61 to \$31.08 per acre, depending on quality.

However, in what some say undermines the credibility of the document, the same Corps economic analysis which reached those conclusions, also advanced some others which would seem to fly in the face of contemporary reality in Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

The Corps report predicts that the respective populations of South Delta counties will increase over the 50-year life of the pump, despite the fact that most of those county populations

have been decreasing steadily since World War II. In the 50-year span between 1940-1990, the combined populations of Sharkey and Issaquena counties decreased by more than 54 percent.

The total population of the twin counties today stands at 8,643.

Similarly, the report predicts that the South Delta civilian labor force will rise over the next 50 years, even though the work force in the twin counties decreased 18 percent from 1980-1990, and like the larger population, has been decreasing progressively since.

Like so much else, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project is apparently subject to the often fickle eye of its beholders.

Is the Yazoo pump an all-in-one tonic for the social and economic ills of the South Delta, one which the Mississippi levee Board advertises as "build it, and industries and businesses will come?" Or is it rather what Virginia Tech professor Leonard Shabman describes as, "formulated principally to protect the owners of farm land from predictable and minor seasonal flooding?"

Like the "Old Man River" of song, whose rising waters ultimately lie at its origins, the great debate that began 60 years ago in the South Delta sump and today extends to the halls of Congress, "just keeps rolling along."

Next Week: Is the secret in the language?

Projected Population, Economic Base Study Area Yazoo Backwater Area, Mississippi

The Corps of Engineers predicts that populations in the South Delta would increase with completion of the pump project

Year	Projected Population ^a (No.)	Ratio of Increase (%)
1996 (current year)	10,470	
2005 (EPD) ^b	10,481	1.00105
2006 (base year) ^c	10,520	1.00373
2015	10,867	1.03298
2025	11,150	1.02606
2035	11,434	1.02847
2045	11,591	1.01373
2055	11,828	1.02045

^aPopulation projections for the Yazoo Backwater economic base study area (Sharkey and Issaquena counties).

^bEPD denotes estimated project completion date.

^cBase year denotes first full year that benefits will be realized after project completion.